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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 KATHMANDU 000510

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STATE FOR SA/INS

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TAGS: [MCAP](#) [NP](#) [PGOV](#) [MASS](#)

SUBJECT: NEPAL ARMY CHIEFS DISCUSS ROLE OF THE ARMY AND  
COUNTERING THE INSURGENCY

REF: KATHMANDU 379

Classified By: A/DCM HOZA. REASON: 1.5 (B, D).

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SUMMARY:  
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1. (C) RNA Chief General Rana and his deputy, Lt. General Thapa, went out of their way to underline their support for democracy at a February 28 dinner with emboffs. Rana stated unequivocally that a coup by the RNA was "out of the question." According to Rana, the RNA's role is to quell the Maoist insurgency, to restore public confidence in the GON's ability to provide security to its people, and to give the GON an opportunity to address widespread poverty and promote development. His deputy, Lt. General Thapa, was surprisingly optimistic in the wake of the debacle at Mangalsen (Reftel A). Thapa stated that the transition from a "ceremonial and peacekeeping" military to a counter-insurgency force would take time and that hard lessons would be learned. He noted that the RNA had enjoyed several significant successes in the immediate aftermath of the Mangalsen attack, particularly through the use of helicopters. Thapa stated that the RNA believes there is a growing split between the political and military leadership of the Maoists, and that the symptoms of that split include greater violence and intimidation of civilians. While optimistic, Thapa made it clear that significant assistance from "Nepal's friends" would be necessary. END SUMMARY.

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RNA CHIEF EMPHASIZES THAT THERE WILL NOT BE A COUP  
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2. (C) Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) Chief of Army Staff Gen. Prajwalla Rana and Deputy Chief Lt. Gen. Pyar Jung Thapa took the opportunity of an RNA-hosted dinner to engage U.S. embassy personnel on their view of the role of the RNA during the current state of emergency in Nepal. The dinner was in honor of participants in the recent UN/PACOM-sponsored peacekeeping seminar here in Kathmandu. Both the Chief and his Deputy went out of their way to underscore their views of the current crisis, specifically discussing the RNA's political perspective, prospects for operations against the armed Maoist insurgency, and the need for material assistance.

3. (C) Chief of Army Staff Gen. Rana went to great lengths to dispel fears of a coup by the RNA. While forcefully stating that "the politicians" must work together for the good of Nepal, he was careful not to criticize the GON. He stated unequivocally that a coup by the RNA was "out of the question" since the RNA cannot solve the country's problems. The RNA could only rule through the imposition of martial law, and that this would only worsen the country's economy "even more than the current state of emergency." Further, he feared that a coup would immediately result in "the US government and European governments withdrawing critical development assistance." Therefore, Rana concluded, it is up to the RNA to neutralize the armed Maoists, to restore public confidence in the ability of the soldiers and police to provide security to the people, and give the GON an opportunity to address the serious development issues confronting the country. He made it clear that the object of the RNA-Maoist conflict would be to encourage Maoists to surrender or defect, that the winning of hearts and minds was more important than the number of Maoists killed, and that the RNA must conduct a clean war with respect for human rights uppermost.

4. (C) Rana spoke with emotion regarding the RNA's critical role in the restoration of public order in the immediate aftermath of the palace tragedy of June 1, 2001. If ever there had been a moment when the RNA could have taken power, said Rana, "that was it." However, he said, the RNA had done its duty to the King and the Nepalese people, maintained public calm, returned the streets to the police, and returned the troops to their barracks. Since then, Rana continued, the RNA has stood by the GON when its visible security presence foiled the Maoist call for a mass rally in Kathmandu

in September 2001. Since the attack on the RNA barracks in Dang in November, the RNA has been forced to engage the Maoists directly, but has only done so under a formal state of emergency properly established through constitutional mechanisms. Rana noted that the RNA would far prefer seeing the Maoists surrender as they "do not want to kill them - they are Nepalis." Rana spoke sincerely about the deplorable poverty, particularly in the countryside, and the need for development to improve the lives of the people.

15. (SBU) BACKGROUND NOTES ON CHIEF OF ARMY STAFF RANA: Rana is a third generation army officer who began his career in 1961. He was a young lieutenant in 1964 when the then-King dissolved the first democratic government and instituted the Panchayat system. In 1990, when demonstrators forced the King to re-institute multi-party democracy, Rana was Director of Military Intelligence. It is reported that, in the face of the popular demonstrations, the RNA had advised the King that they could suppress the demonstrators, that the soldiers would indeed follow orders, but that it would cost over a thousand Nepali lives. The King relented, but not before at least forty demonstrators were killed by the police, backed by the RNA, at one demonstration in front of the palace. That event is often referred to as a searing experience for the RNA, and one that prompted the King, up until the time of his death last June, to keep the RNA away from the conflict against the Maoists. Gen. Rana is scheduled to retire in September 2002, although rumors have arisen that he might be kept on. He is expected to be replaced by his well-regarded deputy, Gen. Thapa.

RNA DEPUTY CHIEF SURPRISINGLY OPTIMISTIC

16. (C) Despite the psychological impact of the recent Maoist victory over the RNA reinforced platoon in Mangalsen, Deputy Chief of Army Staff Lt. General Thapa was surprisingly optimistic about the RNA's prospects for eventual success in quelling the armed Maoist insurgency. In a wide-ranging discussion, Thapa outlined RNA operational thinking as they make the transition from a "ceremonial and peacekeeping" military to a counter-insurgency force. "We will lose a few, and we will win a few," he stated, but the RNA is engaged and will make the transition necessary to defeat the armed Maoists. Expanding on Rana's comments, Thapa stated that the RNA must maintain pressure on the Maoists, attack their morale, and encourage defections. Thapa was optimistic about the prospects of severely degrading the Maoist military capabilities before the start of the monsoon in June. At that point, he said, operations will necessarily slow down due to the weather, and it will be "up to the politicians" to resolve the conflict. "If they fail, then we will be back at work after the monsoons."

MANGALSEN WAS A SETBACK, BUT LESSONS ARE BEING LEARNED

17. (C) When asked why the RNA was so optimistic only two weeks after the debacle at Mangalsen, Thapa made three points. First, the contingent in Mangalsen was not prepared to defend itself. "While we don't like to talk bad about the dead, the commander made many mistakes." He went on to say that the garrison in Mangalsen had not prepared proper perimeter defenses, whereas the recent successful defense of a repeater tower by a similarly-sized garrison was a testimony to the importance of proper tactical preparation. The lessons of site selection, clear fields of fire, razor wire and trip flares were now being systematically passed on to all platoon and company commanders, according to Thapa. Second, Thapa claimed that the Maoist attacks in Achham district, including Mangalsen, were not a complete success. He claimed that it was the Maoist intention to hold the district capital for the entire day. However, the Maoists were surprised by the arrival of RNA reaction forces by helicopter and were forced to leave the area in haste. Similarly, the subsequent Maoist attack on the police post at Salyan was disrupted by the arrival of an RNA helicopter. Third, Thapa continued, since the attack at Mangalsen, the RNA had achieved a number of successes throughout the country and inflicted heavy casualties on "hard-core" Maoist cadre. This was particularly true, he claimed, in the successful ambush of forty-plus heavily armed Maoists trying to return to Kalikot district from Achham. According to Thapa, the RNA had four transport helicopters and two 'gunships' in the area in preparation for a planned cordon and search operation. When the RNA learned that this Maoist contingent would be entering a pass between the two districts, he said, the cordon and search operation was called off and the force was quickly deployed ahead of the Maoist line of march. This successful ambush, high body count, and recovery of

significant weaponry did much to restore RNA morale.

THE RNA CAN WIN, BUT FOREIGN ASSISTANCE WILL BE NEEDED

18. (C) Thapa noted that more such raids will be conducted as the RNA makes the transition to a counter-insurgency role and takes the offensive. It is difficult, however, because of the shortage of troops and the fact that it will be many months before the 5,000 new recruits can take the field. He stated that they are further handicapped by a shortage of equipment that can make the difference, particularly helicopters and the ability to fly them at night or in poor visibility. Thapa noted that the RNA had used what slim resources it had available to contract with an Israeli commercial firm to install some armor plating and fixed machine guns on their existing "scout" helicopters. Thapa went on to say that he had recently had a meeting with the Governor of the Central Bank to determine what further financial resources will be available. He declined to comment on the specific outcome of that meeting, but clearly intended to make the point that the GON Treasury is under strain and that "assistance from Nepal's friends" would be necessary.

THE RNA SEES SPLIT IN MAOIST LEADERSHIP AND SEEDS OF THEIR DEFEAT

19. (C) Gen. Thapa confirmed the RNA's belief that there is a significant split between the Maoist political leadership and their military commanders in the field. During the last few weeks, he claimed, communications between Maoist forces in the field and the political leaders have declined, and disagreements between field commanders and political commissars attached to Maoist military units has increased. Thapa characterized the conversations as criticism by field commanders that "they are doing all the suffering and the political leadership is enjoying all the perks." Thapa did not specify whether his information came from actual communication intercepts or prisoner interrogations. He insisted, however, that current intelligence has confirmed earlier rumors, dating back to November, of a major disagreement over the decision by the Maoists to abandon negotiations and resume military operations. He went on to say that it is the RNA's assumption that this split has widened over the past three months. As a result, the Maoist military campaign is now being directed to a large extent by relatively young and aggressive field commanders with limited intellectual, ideological, or policy grounding. Symptoms include increasing use of violent terror tactics, forced recruitment, and an increasing disregard for the winning of the hearts and minds of the civilian population. In some districts, according to the RNA, villagers are beginning to flee the Maoists, and significant numbers of Maoist fighters are becoming disaffected and may be vulnerable to opportunities to defect to the GON.

110. (C) EMBASSY COMMENT: Gen. Rana certainly said all the right things, and, while not necessarily insincere, was clearly playing to his audience. While Rana avoided criticizing "the politicians," many of his colonels, majors and captains are openly critical of the GON and its perceived failure, in twelve years of democratic governance, to address the issues of poverty and corruption. As for Gen. Thapa's optimism, the RNA will be hard-pressed to overcome the Maoist insurgency before the arrival of the monsoon in June. Despite the possible rift in the Maoist leadership, the political boss, Prachandra, has publicly called for a five-day bandh or strike to begin on the second of April. As with the successful two-day bandh in February, the Maoists may well be planning another major attack like that in Achham to cow the populace into compliance. Whether Thapa's troops can prevent another defeat, or better yet, disrupt Maoist preparations through offensive raids, remains to be seen. Both Rana and Thapa are saying the things "Nepal's friends" want to hear, and they may well be sincere about them. They will indeed need foreign assistance to disarm an increasingly violent and ruinous Maoist insurgency. Whether the GON can capitalize on an RNA victory by addressing the very real issues of poverty and corruption is a much larger question. However, that question will not have a chance to be answered unless the RNA can win this round.

MALINOWSKI